

The Commons

VARIATIONS ON A SCHUBERT COMMUTE



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On Friday, September 30, 1808, a well-dressed eleven-year-old boy and his family left home and walked to the Imperial and Royal Hall of Residence at 796 University Square in Vienna. They had a 3 o'clock appointment.

His older brother Ferdinand remembered the boy wearing “a light blue, whitish coat, so that the other people, including the remaining children who were also to be admitted to the seminary, made fun of him among themselves with such remarks as “That is doubtless a miller’s son; he won’t fail.””

Was he overdressed? Or did the customs and taste of his parents evince foreignness even after living near Vienna for twenty years? Most of the famous Viennese composers came to the city from a distance. This one was born and raised on its doorstep; but at this moment he was seen as the son of immigrants.

The boy was Franz Schubert.

An advertisement four months earlier in the *Wiener Zeitung* set events in motion. It established the time and place of the

audition where both academic and musical “progress” would be examined. Students needed to be at least eleven years old, and in possession of a school certificate. The prize: a position as one of the ten choirboys of the court chapel. The choirboys also received an excellent formal education and were given room and board at the City Seminary.

Father Schubert, himself a schoolmaster, must have clipped the ad and kept it carefully tucked away, anxiously reviewing it several times while preparing Franz over the summer. The summer of 1808 would have seen Franz studying, memorizing, practicing, waiting in anticipation, and assembling an impressive outfit to wear.



Schubert was born in the suburban neighborhood northwest of Vienna called Himmelfortgrund (Heaven’s Gate). Himmelfortgrund is described in the Schubert literature as a suburb because at that time it was not yet a district of Vienna, as it was outside the ancient city fortifications.

I had always imagined it to be an hour or more by car, having mentally calculated the distance in terms influenced by the modern commute. How long would it have taken the Schubert family to walk from their house on 3 Säulengasse to the Imperial and Royal Seminary in the inner city? Inspired by its 200th anniversary, I wanted to measure the distance with my own steps. I set aside the better part of a day.

It took only thirty-eight minutes. But this pathway animated a significant dimension of his experience for me: Schubert walked. For him, the connection of one place to another had a physical rhythm. Timings between most destinations in his life were determined solely by his body. Travel was most often a slow unfolding.

Schubert's String Quartet in A Minor, written in early 1824, takes about 38 minutes to play in its entirety. A significant bandwidth of Schubert's music is cast within this timeframe. Music as diverse as the piano sonata in G major D.894, the piano sonata in D major D.850, the Trout Quintet, or the Symphony No. 4 could each be performed in a close approximation of the time it took for that walk.

At thirty-eight minutes, the four movement quartet could play as a soundtrack on the pathway that connected Schubert from the place where he first discovered the depth of his blazing talent, back to his home. The idea that it would play continuously throughout the walk is modern thinking; a notion that we can take music with us that is not being simultaneously created in the mind's inner ear. But both the music and the pathway could be experienced as unfolding durations of roughly equal length.

The opening of Schubert's String Quartet in A Minor D.804, establishes its trajectory through a rhythm that has the presence of physical motion. It has been compared to song. It is not. It is the memory of song in an age that had no recordings. The song is remembered against an accompanimental rhythm that is like slow meditative walking; a wandering guided by the physicalities of foot logic, but pushed by a mind increasingly preoccupied.



My journey began in the courtyard of the home that Father Schubert mortgaged early in 1801. Both home and office, it was the site of his ever-expanding school. Today the house is numbered as Säulengasse 3. Then it was called *Zum schwarzen Rüssel* (The Black Horse).

“Have you ever been to the Schubert Garage?” asked pianist and political philosopher Balint Vazsonyi in his 1980s Telemusic film on Schubert. He shocked us into realizing that “The Black Horse” was now a place where BMW or Audi service can be

arranged. Father Schubert's school has been used as a garage for better than a quarter century.

"Depressing place, wouldn't you say?" Vazsonyi asked his friend and fellow actor, Sir John Anthony Quayle. The Schubert Garage has become a symbol of underestimation.

Isolated, and seemingly out of context, a plaque above the archway of the building explains its history: "Schubert hat dieses Haus vom Jahre 1801 an durch eine lange Reihe von Jahren bewohnt. Hier als Schulgehilfe seines Vaters gewirkt und zahlreiche unvergängliche Werke darunter den Erlkönig geschaffen." (Schubert inhabited this house from the year 1801 for a long row of years. Here as an assistant in his father's school he worked and created numerous immortal works including "Erlkönig.")

I began my pilgrimage at high noon from the entry corridor of the Schubert Garage. The clacking trill of a pneumatic wrench echoed off walls where the young Franz wrote music. Passing through an arched corridor, I edged onto the Säulengasse, and walked against one-way traffic. Four angle-parked smartcars cluttered the path, blocking pedestrians. These smartcars defied foot logic, attempting to conceal the past with an obtrusive present.

Zum schwarzen Rössel pushes further toward the street than the taller buildings on either side of it. Graffiti marks the face of "The Black Horse." Underestimation. Seen from any angle, the Schubert Garage looks unbalanced and uncomfortable.

Connection to the Nussdorferstrasse is 30 yards away. A noisy, gray street, Nussdorferstrasse is divided down its center by the 38 tram-line. Visible to the left, some seventy yards across the street, was the low roof-line of the Schubert Geburtshaus on 54 Nussdorferstrasse.

The Geburtshaus (birth-house) was purchased by the City of Vienna for \$22,000 one hundred years ago, as reported in a "special cable" to *The New York Times*. "The front [of the house] is

devoid of any attractive features,” said the unnamed author, “but the little court behind, with wooden galleries and a garden on the steep hillside, have a certain picturesqueness.” When Schubert was four, the family moved onto the Säulengasse.

A right onto Nussdorferstrasse, away from the birth-house, which disappeared behind the turn, and I felt the pull of the avenue’s gentle southward curve. Two bridges stood at the close of the curve on Nussdorferstrasse. The bridges cross the junction where the Währinger met the Alser stream (today the Alserbachgasse). The family crossed the first bridge, walking across the street before turning left onto Währingerstrasse. The trip had taken exactly five minutes.



Diverging from the Mozartian script for musical prodigies, Schubert had written no significant musical works at age eleven. He had not toured, nor had he created any public sensation.

The Schubert family played music together. It was a form of domestic communication, and a quiet celebration of time together, but Franz learned effortlessly and soon exceeded the skill level of everyone else. Father Schubert explained: “In his eighth year I taught him the necessary rudiments of violin playing and trained him to the point of being able to play easy duets quite well; I then sent him to the singing lessons of Herr Michael Holzer, choirmaster in Liechtental. The latter averred again and again, with tears in his eyes, that he had never had such a pupil. ‘If I wanted to teach him something new,’ he used to say, ‘he already knew it. Consequently I gave him no real instruction but merely talked with him and regarded him in silent astonishment.’”

Schubert received his first lessons in piano from his oldest brother Ignaz, who wrote of the experience in 1840 with the humor of the surpassed. Ignaz was “very astonished when, after barely a

few months he announced to me that he no longer needed my further instruction and he now wanted to continue on his own.”

No systematic training, but one in which many people around him spoke music as a language. Would it be sufficient?

Währingerstrasse leads straight into Vienna. Edward Holmes wrote about it in the Viennese chapter of his book from 1828 called “A Ramble among the Musicians of Germany.” The Währingerstrasse, which he calls “the road to Währinge,” was “the prettiest outlet of Vienna.”



Thirteen minutes into the walk, and almost halfway to the city, there is an intersection of unusual interest. It is where Währingerstrasse abuts the Schwarzspanierstrasse to the right and the Berggasse on the left.

The intersection is not picturesque or distinguished. It lacks the compressed visual eloquence common in Vienna, and it requires a different tool to unscramble its waveforms.

Just before the opening phrase of the A Minor String Quartet reaches its first cadence Schubert changes the way we hear the music. The remembered song, diatonic and built from contours that fall in spiraling twists is countered by chromatic motion. When we return to the pitch E in the melody at the end of the phrase, it is the identical pitch from which the melody started, but a different harmony. Schubert approached the cadence with an unexpected French augmented sixth chord that pulls our attention toward a harmonic context apart from narrative memory.

This intersection on the Währingerstrasse also needs to be heard as a chord.

Its harmony would be formed by imagining the Schubert family crossing the intersection in 1808, while simultaneously imagining October 15, 1825 as Beethoven was moving onto the second floor of the “Altes Schwarzspanierhaus” (Old Black-robed Spaniard’s House) two blocks away on the Schwarzspanierstrasse. Another voice in this chord would sound when Beethoven died at this location on March 26, 1827. Another with the scene of the massive funeral ceremony, where the 30-year-old Franz Schubert was a torch-bearer in a long procession on the way toward the Währing cemetery.

When he died only a year later, Schubert was interred near Beethoven. The bodies of both Beethoven and Schubert were relocated to graves of honor in the Central Cemetery in 1888, but the original monuments stayed behind. Währing cemetery was deconsecrated and is now named “Schubert Park.” The sounds of children playing in the park envelop these monuments, which still stand, each surrounded by a stark wrought-iron fence.

Still frozen in the center of the intersection, the final element of the Währingerstrasse chord would be formed by considering the left of the intersection as the Berggasse suddenly slopes down. Two blocks away is 19 Berggasse, where Sigmund Freud practiced from 1891 until his 1938 exodus to England.

The ornate façade of the Freud Museum is marked by a large garish sign in bold white Helvetica letters on a red background that from low to high reads: F R E U D. The home became a museum in 1971. There is no underestimation in the Freud Museum; no cars being serviced there.



I was only five minutes from the Ringstrasse. A web of tramlines, cars, bikes and texting pedestrians turned up the volume from the 21st century.

It was hard to imagine what the Schubert family would have seen as they continued toward the city gates of Vienna. They approached the massive walls of the city across an open space called the Glacis. “The buildings of the suburbs are not allowed to approach within a certain boundary of the city walls,” wrote Holmes, “and the appearance of them would be improved if they did not lie so bare to the sun.” The Glacis terminated at the Schottentor: the Scottish gate. Ancient fortress walls, cleared away during the last third of the 19th century to make way for the Ringstrasse, still stood in 1808.

Thirty minutes into the walk they had passed through the gates and entered the inner city.

They would have been pulled toward the Graben, location of an ancient moat. “A broad street in the heart of Vienna,” wrote Holmes, “the pleasantest part of it for a lounge, on account of the splendour of the shops, particularly those of jewelry and of ladies’ shawls, and dresses, in which it is extremely brilliant.”

They may have walked along the Schottengasse, following the plaza of Freyung onto Naglergasse, onetime home of smiths who crafted needles. Naglergasse empties onto the Graben. Soon the city centerpiece, Stephansdom, would have come into view. They would have skirted the Northern side of the plaza to enter onto the Schulerstrasse.

“Figarohaus” is located in the building in which Mozart lived from 1784 until 1787. The site opened as a museum in 1941, and Schubert would have passed within sight of the entranceway most likely unaware that one of his lifelong idols had lived there.

A left onto the Strobelgasse would have pulled the Schubert family away from the Figarohaus, the first in a series of comparably quick turns and changes of direction, like elaborate steps in a dance that was not yet written.

From the Strobelgasse, right onto Wollzeile, a quick left to continue Northeasterly onto Essig; and right onto the Bäckerstrasse. After

two blocks they would have made the university plaza.

The Schubert family would have reached the door at 796 University Square eight minutes after entering the city, thirty-eight minutes after leaving the Schubert Garage.

The terminal points of this journey had the strongest possible contrast. The structure and feel of *Zum Schwarzen Rössel* was distorted by noisy, unrelated business transacted on the site, and it was covered over in graffiti. University Square seemed untouched. It has kept its ghosts.

The square opened up to the left. The Jesuitkirche forms the back of the square and I faced it directly as I turned from Bäckerstrasse. The Akademie di Wissensch (The Academy of Sciences) was on the left, and the Universitäts, our destination, was on the right. The square transmits a uniform feel in photographs and drawings during the two hundred years since the chubby boy wearing that strange blue jacket showed up a little before 3 p.m. on September 30.



At last it was time. Peter Härtling, in the 1995 translation of his novel *Schubert; Twelve Moments Musicaux and a Novel*, recreated the scene:

“He lost all feeling in his head and his body. He was careful not to draw attention to himself, especially from the monks whom they had to follow in single file, who divided them into small groups, herded them into schoolrooms, questioning them one after another, sometimes singly, who dictated to them and for whom they finally had to sing.

“To his astonishment, the clerical teachers were not nearly so exacting in their questions as Father and Herr Holzer. When he had to sing an Italian aria at sight, he noticed that the feeling

was returning to his head and body. He grew hot, his hands were sweating, and he allowed himself another couple of coloraturas.

“That’s Schubert,” he heard someone say.”

This fiction improvises on Ferdinand’s written account of the event, but his brother remembered that at the conclusion of the audition Franz “parted most sorrowfully with his father, mother, brothers and sister; but the gold braid on his uniform seemed to make him calm and confident again.”

A handwritten note from this audition has survived. It was written in Italian instead of German, and indicated that “the best among the sopranos are Francesco Schubert and Francesco Müllner.” It was written by Antonio Salieri. Salieri was present at this audition and was Schubert’s only significant instructor of composition. Schubert began regular private lessons with him in 1812 and studied consistently with Salieri through 1816.

Once he became a member of the community, Franz invested in his new routines at the City Seminary with complete intensity. Leopold Ebner, also a student in the seminary at that time, remembered that “even on the walks which the pupils took together, he mostly kept apart, walking pensively along with lowered eyes and with his hands behind his back, playing with his fingers (as though on keys), completely lost in his own thoughts...I seldom saw him laugh; more frequently I saw him smile, sometimes for no apparent reason, as it were a reflection of the inner life of the soul.”

Schubert had gained admission into a new world and was soaking it up. He became socially embedded.

The pivotal moment took place a little more than two hundred years ago, after a thirty-eight minute walk. It became the foundation that allowed an eleven-year-old boy an opportunity to begin building something miraculous. This was the making of the Schubert whom we recognize in sound.

Presumably Schubert walked to the University Square on numerous occasions during the five years he was there. In 1814 he began training as a teacher in the St. Anna Normalhauptschule, not far away, on 3 Annagasse. During this phase of his life he was a commuter; he walked to and from school every day. His pathway would have been identical to the Stephansdom plaza, where he would have reached Annagasse after taking a right on Karntner. Early in 1818 Father Schubert moved to a larger school on what is today 11 Grünetorgasse. Franz's commute, and the destination toward home both began to vanish.

Franz had difficulty becoming emancipated. He lived with friends, he taught a countess in Hungary, he moved in with his brother, but he only found temporary homes in which to stay. He intensified restless energies in his music that were always present, and he began to identify with the mysterious figure of the wanderer who appears frequently in the late songs. The A Minor String Quartet began to come into focus.

The Schubert commute, from Säulengasse to the University Square, gives insight into the most stable time of Schubert's life. It was the physical pathway that connected the world as he came to know it with his home. It is a window into an ordinary experience from a life that was densely extraordinary.

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4. The citation method will be end notes (a style sheet is available), although it is certainly possible to write an essay without notes at all or with a list of sources for further reading.
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